



REBIRTH, NIRVANA AND NO-SOUL IN BUDDHISM:

Dr. Charu Das

Associate Professor, Arya Vidyapeeth College (Autonomous), Gopinath Nagar, Guwahati, Assam

ABSTRACT

The whole teaching of Buddha is mainly dependent on the four noble truths. The doctrine of Dependent Origination, or Pratityasamutpada, which is the second noble truth of Buddhism, is of great importance. The doctrine of impermanence or the doctrine of pratityasamutpada is related to the concept of no-soul, rebirth, and Nirvana. Pratityasamutpada means that everything in the world is relative, conditional, dependent, and subject to birth and death, and it is, therefore, impermanent. Buddha gave importance only to how to remove suffering from our lives. Therefore, his main aim was to focus the attention of the common people on how they could come out of these sufferings. Human beings suffer in this world because of the lack of actual understanding of the ever-changing nature of the world and its objects or ignorance. The doctrine of no-soul, rebirth, and Nirvana are all based on the doctrine of dependent origination or pratityasamutpada. Generally, we believe that the soul is a permanent substance, and it is not like a material body that changes continuously. But in this world, we have seen nothing permanent. Therefore, to accept the existence of a permanent self is nothing but an illusion for Buddha. Since everything is impermanent, there cannot be any permanent self, which is believed by the common people. For Buddha, we need to focus on the reasons for which we are suffering in this world and how we can come out of it. We should not give much importance to what always escapes from us. Since everything is relative and conditional, we cannot know the existence of anything as a permanent element. But if there is no permanent soul, how can rebirth be possible?

Rebirth is an important concept in the teachings of Buddhism. It is said in Buddhism that until one gets Nirvana, he has to take rebirth again and again. The circumstances into which one is reborn are dependent upon the karma performed in the previous life. In rebirth, the actions or karmas of a sentient being give rise to a new existence after death in an endless cycle called samsara. The endless death and rebirth stop only if Nirvana is achieved by insight. Though different schools of Buddhism have different views regarding rebirth, all the schools agree that rebirth depends upon the karma of the previous life. The critics of the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth say that if there is no soul, only a changing stream of mental energy, then there could be no identity, and to talk about rebirth for experiencing the results of good or bad actions done in the past would be meaningless. This is definitely the common question that arises in the minds of the common people. In the same way, the realization or attainment of Nirvana without a soul is also questionable from different perspectives. So, in my article, I would like to explain whether rebirth and Nirvana are possible without a soul. How does Buddhism explain it?

Buddhism does not deny the existence of the empirical soul, which is everchanging, but denies the existence of the permanent soul. His acceptance of the individual soul is clear from his declaration when he discussed the relation between the burden and the carrier: "he who holds that there is no soul is a man with false notions."¹ But here my question is, since rebirth will take place till the attainment of Nirvana, then after attaining Nirvana, what would be the status of the soul? In my article, I will try to explain it since the soul can attain Nirvana only when the person (or soul) has nothing to experience in the world (good or bad results). Will the soul be destroyed after attaining Nirvana? Or What?

If the soul(empirical) will change forever, and in every moment soul(mind) is a new one, without identity, how can it realize Nirvana?

So, generally, questions come to the minds of people that-

Did Buddha not really believe in any reality which is permanent?

Is there really nothing permanent that we can think about and discuss except impermanence, which is ever-changing?

How far is it justifiable to accept the Buddha's suggestion that we need not discuss these problems like the existence of any permanent reality?

Is it that Buddha gave an incomplete explanation of the reality to his disciples? If it is, then why? But before giving the answers to these questions, we must remember that the Buddha's teaching is strategic. Because of which, many misunderstandings and misin-

Copyright © 2024, IERJ. This open-access article is published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License which permits Share (copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format) and Adapt (remix, transform, and build upon the material) under the Attribution-NonCommercial terms.

terpretations come out due to the lack of understanding on the main teaching of the Buddha, on which he gave emphasis.

KEYWORDS: Impermanence of the soul, causal relation, rebirth, permanent reality, Nirvana

INTRODUCTION

Soul, Rebirth and Karma, Nirvana:

The Buddha gives importance to the doctrine of impermanence or the doctrine of Pratityasamutpada, which is related to the concept of no-soul, rebirth, and Nirvana. Rebirth is an important concept in the teachings of Buddhism. It is said in Buddhism that until one gets Nirvana, he has to take rebirth again and again. The circumstances into which one is reborn are dependent upon the karma created in the previous life. In rebirth, the existence of a new being depends upon his deeds or karmas, for which he has to take birth for an unlimited time until he realizes the freedom from the sufferings of this world. But if Buddhists do not accept a self, who takes rebirth? Although the existence of a self as permanent is refuted by Buddha, he accepted a conventional self that is dependent on causes, conditions, and parts. Nothing is permanent in this world.

For the Buddha, there is neither permanence nor identity. The identity of objects is an unreality. The identity of objects is only another name for the continuity of becoming. It appears to us that a child- a boy- a youth- a man -an old man is one. In spite of these changes in a single life, they are still recognized as the same. This is possible because different aspects of the person change in an unbroken way from moment to moment. A thing is only a series of states, the first of which is said to be the cause of the second, for their natures are the same. Here, we make a mistake in regarding that seeming identity as an inner reality existing in all the changes. To accept the view that "I," or individuality, is eternal, immutable, and will continue forever is wrong. If there is any self, it is nothing but the five aggregates, which are actually not self, or the self, which is changing.

According to Buddha, the continuity of the world is dependent upon the law of causation, and there is no permanent substance. So, the realm of the world is an eternal continuity. The causal evolution is not only a mechanical succession of movements, where the world process becomes a series of extinction and fresh creations. Besides this, it is also a state working itself over another state or informing it with a ceaseless pulsation. It is the determination of the present by the past. That means, in this way, the existence continues from the past to the present. In transitive causation, one state transmits its causal energy (paccayasatti) to some newly conceived germ.² Causal relation can be explained by the simile, such as the seed growing the tree, where one is necessary for the other. All life is a force. What is that force? Is that force permanent in every change? But it is clear that since everything must have a cause, "force" also must have a cause. What is the cause of this force? Even modern scientists are not able to answer this question accurately.

According to the Big Bang theory, all of the current and past matter in the universe came into existence roughly 13.8 billion years ago. During this time, all matter was compacted into a very small ball with infinite density and intense heat. This ball is called singularity, which suddenly began expanding, and

the universe started to begin. (<https://phys.org>) Forces of that singularity are the way through which energy is transformed from one object to another when they interact. Big Bang theory also cannot explain exactly the nature of the cause or origin of the force. However, it is said that this theory is incomplete since it does not explain where from the matter came. It only explains just that there was a large explosion. Big Bang theory is correct just to explain the expansion of the universe but not for the formation of the universe. The Buddhist doctrine of momentariness is also like the Big Bang theory in explaining the ultimate formation of the universe.

Since every event or thing changes continuously, we cannot know what is the first cause. But for the change, there must be some force that leads to death and birth. Though we can never see the working of the force, it is there. In consciousness, we feel its presence. In the same manner, we can say that even if we can find only changes and impermanence, from this, it does not follow that there is nothing real in the world at all except the agitation of forces. We can feel the presence of eternal in our consciousness. Again, if everything is changing and there is an uncaused cause of the universe, then what set the motion, or what is the origin of the impetus? So, it appears that the world is a series of incessantly succeeding phenomena without any permanent cause or soul. Past, present, and future are interrelated. If it is broken up into a succession before and after due to causality, then life becomes just one thing after another. When we say that everything is changing, we oppose it as eternal. So, we need to explain what is eternal. In order to understand fully what change definitely leads us to the question of permanence. And without permanent or unconditional causality, it contradicts itself. We must admit some permanent factors that are present in the whole process of change. It may be the reality as a growing principle or an absolutely permanent element. So, the principle of being or identity is necessary. Buddha gives only a phenomenal explanation of the facts of experience. There is nothing permanent in this world, only change or force of causality. But the question here is, is causality or force started by chance, or it has originated? Buddha does not give any declaration on it.

Aristotle says that "identity is necessary for all change. Change presupposes permanent. In other words, all change involves permanent change. It is the truth accepted by Kant. "Without the permanent, no relations in time are possible." The succession of "b" upon "A" means that "A" is over before "B" begins. The relation between them is called succession, and it cannot exist for either "A" or "B" but only for something present to each of them. If everything in the world only changes and there is nothing other than the successive events in the world, there could be no succession. Then "A" vanishes before "B" begins, "B" before "C" begins, and so on. So, the possibility of any succession implies a relative permanence. There must be something not in the succession but permanent that can carry on each vanishing moment of the succession and add to the next.

Even if we grant that all changes imply a relatively permanent, still the possibility of everything being relatively permanent implies an absolute permanence. The whole world cannot be regarded as a network of relations, a mere mass of connections with which nothing is to be connected. Then, it would be like a flight without a bird. Thinghood cannot be explained fully by mutual relations. So, Buddha limits his attention to the phenomenal world only.

It cannot be right to deny the reality of absolute reality simply because it cannot be known by our finite knowledge. But the interesting thing is that Buddha does not say that change involves a permanent change, nor does he say that change alone is permanent. But if our attention is confined to the phenomenal world, we cannot say anything exactly about the cause of the universe.”³

In early Buddhism, there was not a view that everything was momentary. It actually developed later Buddhism. It says, “It is evident that the body lasts one year... a hundred years and even more. But the mind or consciousness continuously changes. Though it was Buddha’s interest to show that body, mind, etc., are not the true self and are not permanent, it does not mean that they are all momentary. It is obvious in Buddha’s explanation that there is a clear distinction between the momentary character of mental processes and that of non-material reality.”⁴

Sankara believes in the existence of permanent reality. He argues against the doctrine of momentariness in his commentary on the Vedanta Sutras, and for him, “our consciousness cannot be momentary because it belongs to a permanent individual. If an individual does not exist, then recognition and memory become unintelligible. It is said that the consciousness of identity is illusory. By observing the similarity between two things, like a momentary cognition of yesterday and another cognition of today, we wrongly interpret it as an identity of 6. The perceiving consciousness. However, we cannot make a judgment of similarity if there are no two things. If we admit that the doctrine of momentariness is true, then we cannot admit the existence of two things. Here, we must admit the permanence of the perceiving consciousness because it is the only way to combine past cognition and present cognition together. On the basis of that combination, we can make the judgment of similarity. If the past is to be recognized in the present, the permanence of the percipient is necessary.”⁵

The sarvastivadins or the Vaibhasikas argue that unless we admit the external objects are perceived by us, their existence cannot be known in any other way. For example, the inference of fire from the perception of smoke is not possible if we did not perceive both smoke and fire together in the past. So, we must have previous knowledge of the existence of smoke from the fire. If the external objects were never perceived, then their existence could not even be inferred simply from their mental forms.⁶

The Buddhist individual self is a flux or continuity of psycho-physical phenomena. This uninterrupted change is dependent upon the karma of previous lives. That means change is

conditioned by karma; karma is the cause of suffering. We don’t know the beginning and ending of that karma. But if the emphasis is given on continuity as well as on the transitoriness of mental states, then how can the past persist in the present and be involved in the law of karma? Acts of perception and memory become impossible if the mind is continuously changing. We cannot rightly define perception and cannot know even that consciousness is a succession. If the mind is only successive perceptions, there is nothing that perceives. One perception cannot perceive another. Modern Western philosopher Kant also believes that empirical consciousness must be connected to one’s consciousness. This is the basis of all knowledge. Individual knowledge or the knowledge of the world is systematically connected according to law. Knowledge implies the determination of the successive feelings by a subject not in succession. Without the synthesis of self, experience would remain a mere emotional utterance of distinct perceptions and cannot become knowledge. Thus, Sankara argues against the momentariness view, which is applied to the perceiving subject, and contends that without a subject, no synthesis, no knowledge, no recognition is possible.⁷

But in my view, in Buddhism, the phenomenal self is not denied. If we divide the world into two, like Kant, as phenomenal and noumenal, the only phenomenal self is changing. Whenever Buddha says that the self is continuously changing, he is talking about the phenomenal self only, not the noumenal self. The nature of the Noumenal self cannot be explained. It is something indescribable. That may be the reason why Buddha was silent about the existence of the soul, which is permanent or eternal.

Dr. Sogen (Buddhist thinker) says that Sankara has grossly misinterpreted the principle of momentariness. As Dr. Sogen says, Buddhists use this principle to explain any change, however minute, in the phenomenal world. Generally, the common people ask if there is any motive power through which things are changed. In every change, we see that there is a capacity to move, but it does not move unless set in motion by some outside power. All things need some sort of motive power to be changed from one to another. The sword, we know, cannot cut itself, and the finger cannot point itself out its own self. What, then, is the power that makes all things change? As an answer to this question, Buddha spoke of origination, staying, growth and decay, and destruction- Utpada, Sthiti, Jara, and Nirodha. These, he said, are the four characteristics of every composite thing. Since all things have these four characteristics, all things undergo modification and are subjected to repetition of themselves in endless revolution.⁸

But it is the explanation of the phenomenal world, not the complete explanation of the noumenal world. Just as the impermanence of life-appearance presupposes momentary impermanence, and in the same way, momentary impermanence presupposes the impermanence of the self-nature of conditional things. This is a simple, logical deduction. If we try to analyze properly the doctrine of impermanence of the existences of the phenomenal world in the temporal scheme, it will bring us at length to the doctrine of Sunyata, which is inadequately

regarded as “emptiness.”⁹ For example, Oldenberg remarks: “If Buddha avoids the negation of the existence of the ego, he does so in order not to shock a weak-minded hearer. Through the shirking of the question as to the existence or non-existence of the ego, the answer to which the premises of the Buddhist teaching tended is that the ego is not.”¹⁰ If it is true, then Nirvana would mean annihilation. But for Buddha, Nirvana does not lead to a void; only through a negation of the flux does it give a positive return of the self to itself. So, necessarily, it follows from this that there is something but not the empirical self. The self is neither the same as skandhas nor entirely different from it, and it is neither a composite of mind and body nor an eternal substance.¹¹

The relation between an individual and its elements is like the relation between fuel and fire. According to Vatsiputriya, “If there is no fuel, neither (is there anything) we can apply the name fire to. Nevertheless, we cannot maintain that fire is something different from burning fuel, nor can we assert that it is the same. If it were altogether different, fuel could not contain any caloric element (which we know it always does contain). But if there were no difference at all, then the substance that burns and the something that sings would be (one and the same substance). This illustrates (the relation between the individual and its elements). If the elements of a personal life are absent, we do not use the term Individual. Nevertheless, we cannot maintain that the individual is something different from its component elements, nor can we assert that they are identical.”¹² If they were identical, then it becomes unnecessary to distinguish between them. When Buddha says, “O, ye mendicants, I am going to point out to you the burden as well as the carrier of the burden: the five states are the burden, and the pudgala is the carrier of the burden; he who holds that there is no soul is a man with false notions.”¹³ The soul is not completely identical with not-soul, nor completely different from it. To be free from the conditional or empirical world must be a non-empirical condition. However, that non-empirical condition is not detached completely from the empirical series. Every event results from some preceding form of existence, out of which the event has evolved. The theory that everything existing is and is not real and unreal suggests the idealistic view of becoming, which is only an evolution of being. That means the real nature of things or “not-self” is understandable by developing consciousness.

Vatsiputriya says, “The individual or the soul cannot be identical with the elements of a personal life. The elements are momentary apparitions that did not exist in the former moment, but the self is not born in this way. It is born in the sense that acquires new elements, casting away the previous ones, just as by the acquirement of knowledge one becomes a priest or a grammarian, by appropriate distinctions one becomes a Buddhist monk or a Brahminical wandering ascetic, and by a change in the physical condition one becomes old or falls ill. In all these cases, new elements are produced from something already existing.”¹⁴ It was the main teaching of Buddha that every existence is a mixture of two opposites, and in this empirical world, it is not possible for us to separate being and not being. If we try to isolate either of them and determine it

strictly by itself, it will leave only nothingness. Therefore, there must be something that relates both, and that something cannot be the empirical self. Buddha clearly tells us that there is no self. But he does not give any clear account of what it is.

Is Buddha interpreted correctly?

His Categorical teaching is misunderstood by many. I will try to provide some explanations that will answer the questions I mentioned earlier.

Most of the placed Buddha is misinterpreted. Focus is not given to the main teaching of the Buddha and his strategic teaching on self and not self. Buddha’s teaching of no-self is not easily understandable to many Western thinkers or other thinkers of Buddhism. Because when Buddha says that there is no self, he does not mean that there is really no self. If there is no self, how can there be rebirth? We have seen that sometimes, when his answer to the question, “Does self-exist?” seems to be No with a hidden Yes, sometimes he is silent on the question. This is because “the purpose of Buddha’s teaching was to help people find true happiness. He didn’t assume that all beings are inherently good or inherently bad, but he did assume that they all want happiness. However, they tend to be bewildered by their suffering, so they need help in finding a way to genuine happiness.”¹⁵ Since the teaching of not-self or not-ego is a way to find real happiness, Buddha did not try to answer what the self is when he was answering what is not-self.

For example, when “Vacchagotta the wanderer went to the Buddha and, asked the Buddha ‘is there a self?’ But the Buddha did not answer to the question. The Blessed One was silent. Then again, Vacchagotta asked the Buddha, ‘Is there no self?’ The second time, the Blessed One was silent. Then, after the departure, Vacchagotta, the wanderer, Venerable Ananda, asked the Buddha the reason for his silence on the existence and non-existence of the soul; the Buddha said to Ananda, “Ananda, if I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self were to answer that there is a self, that would be conforming with those brahmans and contemplatives who are exponents of eternalism (the view that there is an eternal, unchanging soul). Ananda, If I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self, were to answer that there is no self, that would be conforming with those brahmans and contemplatives who are exponents of annihilationism [the view that death is the annihilation of the self.”¹⁶ That means the affirmative answer then would lead to eternalism, and the negative answer to the question would lead to annihilation. The ego or self is momentary; therefore, it is not eternal. Again, the self is not non-existent. If the self is non-existent, then there can be no transmigration and rebirth to experience the results of past deeds. The truth lies in the middle of the two extreme views. Though we cannot know about the nature of the eternal soul, the phenomenal or empirical self exists. Moreover, the Buddha thought that if he answered that there is no self, then Vacchagotta would surprised in thinking that how the self, which we believe to be existing is not exist now.

But we must keep in mind here that, though the reason for putting aside the question seems to be the bewilderment of

Vacchagotta, there are some other reasons besides this. Buddha did not give an analytical answer to Vacchagotta's questions and did not leave any counter questions to Vacchagotta because the Buddha knew how to give analytical answers to categorical questions whenever he needed to. Buddha's teachings are not easy to understand with simple discussion. His teachings are strategic. In order to understand, they are to be put to use and mastered as skills; only then can the intended result be attained. "He said it was as if a man had been shot by an arrow and was taken to a doctor, and before the doctor could take the arrow out; the man would insist that he find out first who had shot the arrow, who had made the arrow, what the arrow was made of, what kind of wood, what kind of feathers. As the Buddha said, if the doctor tried to answer all of those questions, the man would die first. The first order of business would be to take the arrow out. If the person still wanted to know the answer to those questions, he could ask afterward. In the same way, the Buddha would answer only the questions that provided an answer to our primal question and helped put an end to suffering and stress. Questions that would get in the way, he would put aside because the problem of stress and suffering is urgent." ¹⁷

It is said that Buddha's teaching of "not-self is aimed at negating the view of the Upanishadic self. According to Upanishads, the self is permanent, cosmic, and identical God-but. The Buddha does not negate the existence of an individual self. This is a misinterpretation.

Moreover, Buddha is misinterpreted in saying that he negates or rejects the idea that you have a small, separate self, but he is affirming the existence of a large, interconnected, cosmic self. Buddha in Majjhima Nikaya (sec-22) says that the idea of a cosmic self is foolish. He argued that since the cosmos cannot belong to the self, then the self cannot be called cosmic. In other words, if there is a self, there must be what belongs to a self. If the self is cosmic, then the whole cosmos must belong to the self. Since it does not, it cannot be called cosmic self. It is clear in Buddha's discussion with the monks-

"Mendicants were a self to exist, would there be the thought,

'Belonging to myself'

"Yes, Sir."

"Were what belong to a self to exist, would there be the thought, 'My self?'"

"Yes, Sir."

"But since a self and what belongs to a self are not actually found, is not the following a totally foolish teaching: "Not actually found" renders staccato theta to anupalabbhamane. 'The cosmos and the self are one and the same. After death, I will be permanent, everlasting, eternal, imperishable, and will last forever and ever?'"

"How could it not, sir? It's a totally foolish teaching."

Again, it is said that the Buddha is affirming that the five aggregates are what you are. But these five aggregates don't qualify to be called a self because they are not permanent. They are just processes.

The Buddha says repeatedly that it is not fitting to identify the aggregates as "what I am"[Majjhima Nikaya-109]. As we will see later, he explains the five aggregates as the raw material from which we create our sense of selves, but that it's not skillful to think that they constitute what we are. Another problem with this misinterpretation is that it opens the Buddha to charges of lying in the many passages where he does refer to the self in a positive way—as when he says that the self is its own mainstay. If there really is no self at all, why does he talk about it as if it exists? To get around this problem, the interpretation introduces the distinction between two levels of truth: conventional and ultimate. Thus, it says that when the Buddha talks about self, he does so only in a conventional way. On the ultimate level, no self exists. The problem with this distinction is that the Buddha himself never uses it—it was introduced into the tradition at a much later date—and if it were so central to understanding his teachings, it is thought that he would have mentioned it. But he didn't.

There's also the problem that if the aggregates were what you are, then—because Nirvana is the ending of the aggregates—that would mean that when you attain Nirvana, you would be annihilated. The Buddha, however, denied that Nirvana was annihilation.

So, these are some interpretations that cannot give the correct explanation of Buddha's teaching.

According to Buddha, it is not that the self does not exist. But for him, teaching not to be self and self are activities. He says the teaching of not-self is a strategic activity, and we have to master it as a skill. Because it is the skill to know how to put down a particular sense of self when it is no longer skillful, and ultimately, this activity will take us to know how to let go of them all, i.e., particular senses of the self. Therefore, the understanding of self and not-self as activities is the way through which it becomes easy to see how Buddha answers his basic question- "What will I do that will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" In other words, what will lead us to Nirvana? That means when, through practice, we learn how to use perceptions of self and not-self in a skillful way, we will know ourselves that these skills are a very effective answer to that question.

It is often asked by most the people for Buddha "If there is no self, what does the

action and what receives the results of the action?"

As an answer to this quest, it must be said that-

The Buddha never said that there is no self, and he never said that there is a self. This is because the ultimate goal of his teaching is to teach people how to get freedom from suffering.

He tries to show how to define our “selves” as a means to attain the ultimate freedom from suffering. His categorical teaching of self and not self is based on his teaching of skillful and unskillful karma (karma). He teaches when the perception of self is skillful karma and when it is a perception of not-self skillful karma. And when they are not skillful?

Our understanding is a strategy, and in this strategy, we continuously make many selves, all the time, using different changing modes. All the changes of these selves become very apparent during meditation. Our mind is like a committee. Each member of the committee is a different self that we create and nurture at some point during our life as a particular strategy for attaining particular happiness. These changes can be perceived by us through meditation. Meditation is a skill through which we can learn how to control unskillful activities and how to achieve order and honesty among the different members of the committee and identify more skillful activities and bring some truth to their interactions so that we can bring the mind into meditation.

So, as an answer to the question, who will realize Nirvana or freedom from suffering? The Buddha says that to attain freedom from suffering, we have to make skillful use of both kinds of strategies- self-strategies and not-self strategies and to learn how to employ them ever more skillfully, with more awareness, more discernment, to help with the duties of the four noble truths. We can distinguish between self and self by means of self-control. But from the perspective of four kinds of mental processes, feeling, perception, fabrication, and self-consciousness, we cannot have absolute but relative control over them. Buddha, therefore, recommends that when we can achieve some control over the body and mind, we can use that control to put an end to suffering. Healthy and strong relative control is enough to lead us to the path to the end of suffering. Buddha says, first of all, we have to start to abandon unskillful actions and develop skillful ones in their place. We have to use the aggregates to be generous, to develop virtue, and to develop the mind through meditation.

When we acquire the skill, we are ready for the higher level of right view, where we start applying the perception of not-self. This is the step where we see that even though the levels of meditation are a form of long-term welfare and happiness. But still, they are uncertain and inconstant. Through it, my sense of happiness has become more refined, and my standards for happiness have become higher. Therefore, Buddha recommends that we develop the perception that even the pleasure of jhana is inconstant, stressful, and not self. This gives rise to a sense of dispassion. At this stage, our sensitivity to pleasure and happiness leads to the realization that long-term happiness is no longer good enough. It's no longer good enough for us to want to call it “my.”

When the mind becomes more and more focused on the pleasures of jhana, all of our clinging gets focused in one place, a place of great stability and clarity, so that we can watch clinging in action. When all our clinging is focused here, then when we are finally ready to cut this one last form of clinging, there's no

further clinging to any fabricated phenomena at all. Therefore, the way to learn how to apply the perception of not-self, even to jhana, is to get an opening to the deathless. And when we can apply the perception of not-self to the phenomenon of the deathless, the mind goes beyond all phenomena and arrives at ultimate freedom and ultimate happiness—total freedom, total happiness. It is such a higher form of pleasure that enables us to look at suffering and pain without being afraid of them. That way, we can look at them and comprehend them with proper understanding and confidence.

According to some Western thinkers, teaching rebirth is confusing. However, this confusion is due to a lack of a proper understanding of Buddha's main teachings. That means, generally, we do not try to understand his teaching. Rebirth was such an important topic at the time of Buddha for and against which most people argued. But it can be said that without the proper understanding of the teaching of not-self, most of them argued, which caused confusion.

Though Buddha did not believe in the permanent individual soul, he consciously accepted an unlimited death and rebirth. What is the meaning of it? He explained the idea or issue of rebirth in a unique way. He talked about rebirth as a process of clinging and craving. Through this process, we can have some control over it. Rebirth is not such that it can be proved. But for Buddha, it is a working hypothesis. (A working hypothesis is a hypothesis that is provisionally accepted as a basis for further research in the hope that a tenable theory will be produced, even if the hypothesis ultimately failed or may not fail. It is a hypothesis accepted as a starting point for further research). Buddha's practice is ultimately concerned with what is true, and rebirth is useful for fostering skillful attitudes that help in developing the path to freedom from suffering.

The act of assuming rebirth is an important lesson in not-self. The teaching of not-self relates to the issue of rebirth and kamma (karma). Buddhism says it is our karma that subjects us to a repetition of births and deaths. Thus, although from the theoretical standpoint, Buddhism denies the existence of an imperishable individual self(soul), it accepts the same from the ethical standpoint. Although from the philosophical perspective, Buddha rejects the doctrine of the soul's immortality, he does not deny the continuity of personality. Here, we see the similarity between Buddha and the modern Western philosopher Kant. Kant denied the eternal existence of the personal self in his Critique of Pure Reason but accepted it in his Critique of Practical Reason.

All our pleasure and pain are fruits of what we did in the past, either in this life or in an anterior birth. Nothing can save us from the effects of karma we did. The only thing that follows a man after death, according to Buddhism, is karma. Buddha says in Samyutta Nikaya - “Nor grain, nor wealth, nor gold, nor silver, nor wife, nor child, nor slave, nor servant, nor dependent, can accompany a dying man, but must remain behind him; while, whatever a man doth through his body, speech, or thought, are to be called his own by him for they follow him when he departeth this life like a shadow that leaveth not. Therefore,

all men should do noble deeds considering them to be a stored treasure for future weal, and a crop of merit sown in this life will yield, in a future birth, a rich harvest of bliss.”¹⁸

According to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra, a person who has attained the fruits of enlightenment by his pure karma of body, speech, and thought takes rebirth in the realm of Buddha. Again, if a person who did many wholesome deeds, like the ten wholesome deeds, or observed the Eight Precepts on regular observance day earnestly in his whole life will have blessings to be reborn in the realms of deva (gods) after death. In the same way, if a person commits extremely severe crimes during their life, such as murdering their father or mother, murdering Arhats, creating a schism within the sangha, destroying temples and pagodas, burning Sutras or Buddha statues, they will fall to hell immediately after death. (<https://en.thaythichtruchthaiminh.com>.)

Not self-teaching is the way to know what is unskillful so that we can investigate what is skillful or proper. So, it becomes necessary for us to find the things that may prevent us from taking or learning good skills in our way of investigation, in which we perceive the next higher set of self to leave the not-self or unskillful. To take rebirth is to experience the fruits of past deeds and to develop ourselves to know what we should not do in the next life. So, the idea of repeated rebirth may be an extreme example of creating a strong self. In a similar manner, the act of assuming rebirth is an important lesson to not self. Because, at the time of our death, we cannot take everything with us. So, we have to focus carefully on learning what we can and cannot take with us. The things that we cannot take with us, we have to leave as not-self or unskillful. This practice gives us inspiration that forces us to have a perception about the things that are valuable in our lifetime, not only invaluable in this life but also valuable after the death of life. So, it creates a sense of carefulness to see which of our top priorities we give.

However, “This is not just an exercise in delayed gratification, because even in the present moment you gain a healthy sense of self, one that’s always trying to learn how to do what is skillful, always trying to learn from mistakes, and always willing to learn how to let go of unhealthy ways of identification. Contemplating these facts gives you a sense of empowerment, of command. You can shape the life that you want, the life that will give rise to long-term happiness, both now and in the future.”¹⁹

For me, the issue of rebirth and Nirvana are related to the existence or non-existence of the soul, either directly or indirectly. According to Buddha, rebirth is a continuous process of the realization of the self until we achieve long-term happiness both now and in the future. The birth of a being means the arising of aggregates or psycho-physical phenomena in this present life. Birth and death are only two phases of the same process. Birth precedes death, and death precedes birth. This constant succession of birth and death, which are related to individual life, constitutes what is technically known as samsara. Here, naturally, the question arises: What is the ultimate origin of this samsara? Or the origin of life? Buddha answered that-

“Without a cognizable beginning is this samsara. The earliest point of beings who are obstructed by ignorance and fettered by craving, wander, and fare on, is not to be perceived.”²⁰

This lifestream flows continuously as long as it is fed with the muddy water of ignorance and craving. This lifestream ceases to flow, in the case of Buddhas and Arahants. But the beginning of this life stream cannot be determined.

Therefore, we have seen.

1. that the beginning of the lifestream of living beings is not the origin and evolution of the universe. Suppose it is left to the scientists to speculate on it. According to scientists, we are the direct products of the sperm and ovum cells provided by our parents. However, scientific explanations regarding the development of the mind are not satisfactory enough. Our lives are necessarily preceded by those of our parents and so on. In this way, life is preceded by life until one goes back to the first protoplasm or colloid. However, scientists are ignorant about the origin of the first protoplasm or colloid.²¹
2. When Bhikkhu Malunkyaputta said to Buddha, “Lord,” “these theories have not been elucidated, have been set aside and rejected by the Blessed Whether the world is eternal or not eternal; whether the world is finite or infinite. If the Blessed One will elucidate these questions to me, then I will lead the Holy life under Him. If he will not, then I will abandon the precepts and return to lay life.” The Buddha then advised him not to waste time and energy on speculations, which is not beneficial to his moral progress.

“So, Malunkyaputta, remember what is undeclared by me as undeclared and what is declared by me as declared. And what is undeclared by me? ‘The cosmos is eternal’ is undeclared by me. ‘The cosmos is not eternal’ is undeclared by me. ‘The cosmos is finite’... ‘The cosmos is infinite’... ‘The soul is the same thing as the body’... ‘The soul is one thing and the body another’... ‘After death, a Tathagata exists’... ‘After death, a Tathagata does not exist’... ‘After death, a Tathagata both exists & does not exist’... ‘After death, a Tathagata neither exists nor does not exist’ is undeclared by me.

“And why are they undeclared by me? Because they are not connected with the goal and are not fundamental to the holy life. They do not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calm, direct knowledge, self-awakening, or unbinding (Nibbana). That’s why I undeclared them. “And what is declared by me? ‘This is stress,’ is declared by me. ‘This is the origination of stress,’ is declared by me. ‘This is the cessation of stress,’ is declared by me. ‘This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress,’ is declared by me. And why are they declared by me? Because they are connected with the goal and are fundamental to the holy life. They lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding. That’s why they are declared by me.”²² That means we can know only that everywhere, there is

suffering in the world. Our goal is to get freedom from suffering, which is nothing but the achievement of direct and calm knowledge, self-awakening, and the knowledge of unbinding.

We can understand that Buddha's teaching is strategic. So, all the questions cannot be answered at once. When we train ourselves to have higher and higher knowledge, we can understand these. Due to his strategic teachings, in some places, he denies the existence of the self, and in some places, he accepts. If in some places he denies the eternal reality, in some places, it seems to be accepted by him. For example,

However, Buddha refused to reply to the question of the ultimate reality or eternality, which lay beyond the categories of the phenomenal world; he did not seem to have any doubt about it. We cannot accept that Buddha did not recognize any permanent behind his transitory world because, he said,

"There is bhikkhus, a not-born, a not-brought-to-being, a not-made, a not-conditioned. If bhikkhus, there were no not-born, not-brought-to-being, not-made, not-conditioned, no escape would be discerned from what is born, brought-to-being, made, conditioned. But since there is a not-born, a not-brought-to-being, a not-made, a not-conditioned, therefore an escape is discerned from what is born, brought-to-being, made, conditioned."²³

3. Buddha did not recognize the permanent like Paramatman, of which the world is the reflection. This is because Buddha was primarily a moral teacher (although he did not attempt to solve all the ethical problems except suffering) and then a philosopher. He did not declare that there is permanent. Had he declared it, the common people would turn over their attention from their primary duty practice on how to come out of their sufferings, and they would waste their time contemplating on that. But it is confusing to us that without the soul, who will realize that ultimate state of bliss? Even the Tathagata or Arahant does not recognize bliss.
4. Buddha's teachings of "the soul" were not clear. It is not clear to Buddha whether a human being who has attained Nirvana as an Arahant "after death exists, does not exist; both Buddha did not share, as his main focus was to help people understand how they have to work towards their own salvation through the process of attaining Nirvana. But it is not easily understood by the people when he says, "Nibbanam paramam sukham, Nibbana is the highest bliss."²⁴ It is bliss supreme because it is not a kind of happiness experienced by the senses. It is a blissful positive relief from the ills of life. If there is no soul, who will realize that bliss?
5. Nagarjuna, in his commentary on the Prajnaparamita Sutra, says that Tathagata sometimes taught that the Atman exists, and at other times he taught that the Atman does not

exist. When he said that the Atman exists, it means that the soul is the receiver of misery or happiness in the successive life according to its own karma. Since Buddha's purpose was to save men from falling into the heresy of nihilism, when he said that there is no Atman or soul, he said it in the sense of a creator or a perceiver, which is absolutely free from five skandhas. So, it does not deny the existence of the soul to save men from falling into the opposite heresy, eternalism.

Here, a question arises: Which of these two views represents the truth?

The doctrine of the denial of Atman is difficult to understand. Buddha thought that it would not be understandable by the common people whose intellect is dull. And such people, after hearing the doctrine of an Atman, would have been sure to fall into the heresy of nihilism. The two doctrines were taught by the Buddha for two very different objects. When he said the soul exists, he wanted to impart to his hearer the conventional doctrine. He also talked about the non-existence of the soul to impart to them the transcendental doctrine.²⁵ According to some Buddhist thinkers, the Buddha actually did not make such a distinction.

6. It seems contradictory that the Buddha talks about cause and effect all the time, but he does not know what the original cause of this universe is, which is the series of cause and effect and nothing else. In the eyes of the Buddha, the world is nothing but samsara, the cycle of repeated birth and death. So, it is not illogical to ask what the original cause of the universe is. When he says that the world is not both eternal nor not eternal, asking someone to give the meaning of eternal cannot be meaningless or foolish, although we should not give priority to such questions. I think it is not that Buddha has no answer to these questions, but he says these questions are meaningless for the people because, without following the methodical path of Buddha's teachings, it is not understandable to ordinary people.

CONCLUSION

The question of Nirvana is the most difficult in the teaching of the Buddha. Our speculation will not lead us to a position to understand the nature of Nirvana. The best way to understand Nirvana is intuition. Only a straight path that leads to Nirvana is explained by Buddha with all the necessary details and is laid open to all. Alara Kalama, who became a disciple of Buddha to learn ecstatic meditation, declared that the individual soul, to make himself free, has to abolish himself,

"Having abolished himself by himself, he sees that naught exists and is called a nihilist; then, like a bird from its cage, the soul escaping from the body is declared to be set free; this is that supreme Brahman constant, eternal, and without distinctive signs, which the wise who know reality declare to be liberation."²⁶ Buddha objected to this doctrine on the ground that the liberated soul (Arahant) was still a soul. The element

of Nirvana, according to Buddha, is without a basis. A liberated soul also cannot attain Nirvana. He says,

“Herein, O Bhikkhus, a Bhikkhu is an Arahant... is delivered. In this very life, all his sensations will have no delight for him; they will be cooled. This is called ‘the Element of nirvana without a basis.’”²⁷

Buddha knows that there is something else beyond this phenomenal world. For him, the soul is not only the combination of elements, but he refuses to speculate on that. The Upanishads hold that reality is beyond this phenomenal world; we can arrive by stripping the self of veil after veil of not-self or not real or the conditional. At the end of the process, they find the universal self, which is none of these finite entities, though the ground of all. Buddha holds the same, but he does not state it definitely. Although he denies the immortality of the aggregates that constitute the complex empirical individual and some unphilosophical or religious views, like the Upanishads, he also allows the subject self to be indemonstrable. Even our introspection or intuition cannot seize it. But even then, we can assume that it is the subject that sees all else. Without it, we cannot account for the empirical self. It is the unifying agency. Without this unifying or immanent principle, the life of man becomes inexplicable.²⁸ It is the reason for which the Buddha consistently denies the non-existence of the reality of the soul.

REFERENCES

1. S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy (vol.1), Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1923, p.387.
2. *ibid*, p.372
3. *ibid*, p.377
4. *ibid*, p.372
5. *ibid*, p.399
6. Satischandra Chatterjee and Dharendra Mohan Datta, An Introduction to Indian Philosophy, Motilal Banarasidass, Delhi, 2016, p. 151
7. S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy (vol.1), Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1923, p. 397
8. Sogen Yamakami, Systems of Buddhistic Thought, Calcutta University Press, 1912., p.12
9. *Ibid*, p.14
10. Dr. Hermann Oldenberg, Buddha: His life, His doctrine, His order, William and Norgate, 1882, p.27318.
11. S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy (Vol.1), Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1923, p.387
12. Theodore Stcherbatsky, The Soul Theory of Buddhism, New Bharatiya Book Corporation, Delhi, 2019, p.31
13. S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy (Vol.1), Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1923, p.387
14. Theodore Stcherbatsky, The Soul Theory of Buddhism, New Bharatiya Book Corporation, Delhi, 2019, p.48-49
15. Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff), Selves and Not-self, U.S.A., 2011, p.7
16. Samyutta Nikaya (44;10)
17. Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff), Selves and Not-self, U.S.A., 2011, p.8
18. Sogen Yamakami, Systems of Buddhistic Thought, Calcutta University Press, 1912. p.42
19. Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff), Selves and Not-self, U.S.A., 2011, p.42
20. Narada, Buddha, and His Teachings, Jaicco publishing house Mumbai, 2006, p.267
21. *Ibid*. 264
22. Majjhima Nikaya (63)
23. Udana, viii.3
24. Narada, Buddha, and His Teachings, Jaicco publishing house Mumbai, 2006, p.345
25. Teachings of Buddha Chapters 21 – 30 – Nakkeran. <https://nakkeran.com/index.php/2020/01/17/teachings-of-buddha-chapters-21-30/>
26. S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy (vol.1), Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1923, p.389
27. The unanswered questions - Encyclopedia of Buddhism. https://encyclopediaofbuddhism.org/wiki/The_unanswered_questions
28. *Ibid*, p.385
29. Narada, Buddha, and His Teachings, Jaicco publishing house Mumbai, 2006, p.399
30. S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy (vol.1), Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1923, p.389
31. Thich Nhat Hanh, The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching, Rider, London, 1999.
32. The Questions of King Milinda, Edited by N.K.G. Mendis, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy- Sri Lanka, 1993
33. Dr. Chandradhar Sharma, A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy, Motilal Banarasidass, Delhi, 1976.
34. Buddhist Studies: Rebirth. <https://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/dharmadata/fdd47.htm>
35. The unanswered questions - Encyclopedia of Buddhism. https://encyclopediaofbuddhism.org/wiki/The_unanswered_questions
36. A sutra for this morning — NewBuddhist. <https://newbuddhist.com/discussion/27031/a-sutra-for-this-morning>
37. Teachings of Buddha Chapters 21 – 30 – Nakkeran. <https://nakkeran.com/index.php/2020/01/17/teachings-of-buddha-chapters-21-30/>
38. A sutra for this morning — NewBuddhist. <https://newbuddhist.com/discussion/27031/a-sutra-for-this-morning>
39. Nibbana Sutta: Parinibbana. <https://vipassana.com/canon/khuddaka/udana/ud8-3b.html>
40. The unanswered questions - Encyclopedia of Buddhism. https://encyclopediaofbuddhism.org/wiki/The_unanswered_questions MN.22. Alagaddūpama Sutta (“The Simile of the Snake”) - The Empty Robot. <https://theemptyrobot.com/texts/tipitaka/sutta-pitaka/majjhima-nikaya/alagaddupama-sutta/>
41. Bhattacharya, S., & De, P. (2016). Digital banking in India: Trends and prospects. The Journal of Internet Banking and Commerce, 21(3), 1-9.